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ABSTRACT

This research study was designed to assess preservice elementary education teachers' knowledge of U.S. history. The "High School Subject Tests: American History," developed by Scott, Foresman and Company for use with high school students, was administered to 139 elementary education majors enrolled in required undergraduate social studies methods courses at a southern university. This 50-item test was comprised of eight content areas: chronology, ideology, politics, economics, government, geography, foreign policy, and social history. Findings revealed that three-fourths of the students would have failed the test (scoring 70 percent or less) and that they showed no strength in any particular content area. Fifty-one percent made scores of 28 or less, and only 20 students scored 37 or above. Comparing strengths and weaknesses, these students knew more about recent U.S. history than history prior to the twentieth century. It is concluded that many of these prospective teachers may have difficulty teaching elementary social studies. Student performance was evaluated and presented in 10 tables detailing the percentage of correct responses by content area. A 12-item bibliography is provided. (GEA)

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Preservice Elementary Education Majors' Knowledge of American History

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Running head: KNOWLEDGE OF HISTORY

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Abstract

One hundred thirty-nine elementary education majors were administered a 50-item test designed to measure high school students' knowledge of American history. The students' performance was poor. Students appeared to be more knowledgeable of recent American history than of early American history. These data provide evidence that many of these prospective teachers may have difficulty teaching social studies content.

Preservice Elementary Education

Majors' Knowledge of American History

History has been a central part of the curriculum in American schools since colonial times. According to Hunkins, Jeter, and Maxey (1982), the study of history helps us understand how we have become what we are, and this knowledge can provide an understanding of where we are going. The study of history has been promoted through the years as a vehicle for the inculcation of citizenship and the transmission of democratic values (Barr, Barth, & Shermis, 1977; Gagnon, 1987; Jarolimek, 1977). Shared values and beliefs are transmitted from generation to generation and provide the foundation of a community of similar beliefs.

The study of history has also been considered a mode of teaching thinking skills (drawing conclusions, seeing differing points of view, making and testing hypotheses, etc.). Lengel (1987) views history, current events, and culture study as the best context in which to teach these thinking skills.

Ravitch (1985) rejects the view that history should be used to "teach students patriotism, morals, value clarification, or decision making" (p. 32). She advocates the teaching of history as the "pursuit of truth and understanding" which provides students "with cultural resources on which they may draw for the rest of their lives" (p. 32).

The need for elementary teachers to be well-founded in historical knowledge is supported by the standards for preparation

of social studies teachers developed by the National Council for the Social Studies' Executive Committee (1988). These standards include "the study of United States history and government, world geography and culture, world history and economics" (p. 11) which should constitute a minimum of 15% of a four-year or extended degree program. The same courses are suggested for middle school and departmentalized elementary school teachers, but these courses should comprise not less than 30% of the four-year or extended program. This preparation should provide teachers with the world view and the commitment to democratic values believed necessary for the teacher of social studies.

The emphasis being placed on the study of history in the elementary curriculum is reflected in the changes noted in some elementary textbooks. Findings from a study (Birchell & Taylor, 1986) that compared a representative sample of elementary texts from 1969-72 and those from 1979-82 indicate that greater emphasis is "placed on the study of American history, heritage, and tradition in texts published during the 1979-82 period" (p. 81). The authors conclude that the "disciplines of history and geography have re-emerged as the major focus of elementary social studies" (p. 81).

A knowledge of history is necessary for elementary social studies teachers. Are these teachers prepared? Only one study was found that tested preservice elementary education majors' knowledge of American history. Diem (1982) used a 30-item

practice test for the General Education Development (GED) Test to measure elementary education majors' (n=128) knowledge of various social science disciplines. Of the the 30 items, seven covered history topics. He concludes that all of the elementary education majors would have made a passing score on the test, based on the cut-off score used by the majority of states. Unfortunately, Diem did not discuss student performance by content of test items.

Several other studies were found that were somewhat related. In a study conducted by Educational Testing Service and reported in the Chronicle of Higher of Education ("Most U. S. Students...," 1981), 101 questions on global understanding were asked of 3,000 students from 185 two-year and four-year colleges and universities. It was found that the average college senior answered about 50% of the questions on world affairs correctly while the average freshman and two-year college student answered about 40%. Those students majoring in history had the highest average score with about 60% correct answers, while education majors had the lowest scores with an average of about 40%.

In a study (Ravitch & Finn, 1987) funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities with testing conducted by the National Assessment of Educational Progress, 7,812 seventeen-year-olds were tested on their knowledge of history and literature. The test consisted of 262 questions--141 history questions and 121 literature questions. The questions were written at the knowledge level, and most of the history questions were drawn from American

history. Although over 70% of the students in the study were currently enrolled in an American history course, the results indicate a lack of knowledge of history. The authors state that the "average student correctly answered 54.5 percent of the questions that he/she attempted" (p. 46). Of the 141 history questions, only 15 were answered correctly by at least 80% of the students in the study. The questions were designated as belonging to one of fifteen history clusters. Results indicate that the students did best in two areas: (a) map and geography and (b) science and technology. The average score in both areas was 71%. The two areas in which scores were lowest (less than 50%) were (a) pre-national and colonial eras and (b) Reconstruction to World War I. Recommendations made by the authors include devoting more time to the teaching of history from the earliest grades through high school and requiring at least two years of world history.

These two studies indicate a lack of history knowledge in general at the high school and at the college levels. This certainly has implications for colleges of education. While research shows that education majors lack global understanding, the high school population in general also exhibits a similar lack of knowledge. The Ravitch and Finn (1987) study indicates a less than stellar performance for even the top high school students in knowledge of history and literature. The students, from whom colleges of education will be drawing their preservice teachers, enter college with a dismaying lack of knowledge about the history

of their own country.

The study reported here is one of four studies that examined preservice elementary education majors' knowledge of American history, world geography, American government, and economics. This study examined knowledge of American history.

Procedures

Sample

The sample consisted of 139 elementary education majors enrolled in required undergraduate social studies method courses at a university located in a southern state. Data were collected over a four semester period. The university, the largest in the state, was founded as a teacher training college. The approximate enrollment was 13,000 students. The sample was predominantly white females. Approximately 10% of the sample could be classified as nontraditional college students in that they were over 22 years old.

Instrument

The High School Subject Tests: American History, developed by Scott, Foresman and Company, is intended for use with high school students; therefore, validity and reliability data are based on samples of high school students. Reliability on the 50-item test, as estimated by the Kuder-Richardson Formula 20 test, is .85 (Gatta, 1980).

The American history test is comprised of eight content areas. The content areas are chronology (6 items), ideology (6

items), politics (6 items), economics (6 items), government (5 items), geography (5 items), foreign policy (9 items), and social history (7 items).

Results

The range of correct responses on the test and correct responses by item and content are presented in Tables 1 and 2. Scores ranged from 10 to 47. The mean and standard deviation was 28.561 and 7.428 respectively. Fifty-one percent of the students made scores of 28 or less. Approximately 34% of the students responded correctly to 50% or less of the items. Approximately 78% of the students made a D (less than 70%) or F. Twenty students (14%) scored 37 or above. A score of 37 represents the 90th percentile for high school students.

Insert Tables 1 and 2 about here

The number of correct responses to the six chronology items is presented in Tables 2 and 3. The topics of these six items are (a) the time of the settlement of the 13 colonies, (b) the century in which the American Revolution occurred, (c) the Civil War, (d) the Reconstruction Era, (e) the Cuban Missile Crisis, and (f) Lyndon Johnson's presidency. Seventy-one percent of the students correctly identified the time period in which the Cuban Missile Crisis occurred, while 69% identified when Lyndon Johnson was president. Only 59% of the students could identify the century in

which the 13 original colonies were settled; only 56% could identify the period in which the Civil War occurred; 54% could identify the time period of the American Revolution; and 55% could identify the time period of the Reconstruction Era.

Insert Table 3 about here

Five items are related to the development of our government. The topics of the five items are (a) the beginnings of representative government in America; (b) Northwest Ordinance; (c) judicial review; (d) Missouri Compromise, Compromise of 1850, and the Kansas-Nebraska Act; and (e) democratic participation (initiative, referendum, recall, and direct primary). The most difficult item was related to the Virginia House of Burgesses--the beginning of representative government in America. Only 26% of the students responded correctly to this item. Surprisingly, the next most difficult item was related to the famous Marbury v Madison case which established the principle of judicial review. Only 44% of the students responded correctly to this item. Student performance was acceptable on the remaining three items. See Tables 2 and 4.

Insert Table 4 about here

The third content area, ideology, has six items. The

students performed best on items related to principles expressed in the Declaration of Independence (76% correct), M. L. King's "I Have a Dream Speech" (76% correct), and the idea of manifest destiny (73% correct). They performed poorly on items related to states' rights theory (43% correct), principle of democratic self-government (48% correct), and Jeffersonian democracy (37% correct). See Tables 2 and 5.

Insert Table 5 about here

The fourth content area, foreign policy, has 9 items (see Tables 2 and 6). Students performed best on the following items: (a) effect of the atomic bomb on foreign policy (83% correct); (b) S.A.L.T., peaceful coexistence, and detente (72% correct); (c) cold war (68% correct); (d) similarities in the causes of World War I and the War of 1812 (65% correct); (e) Teheran, Yalta, and Potsdam Conferences (63% correct); and (f) U.S. entry into World War II (59% correct). Students performed poorly on the following items: (a) What is NATO? (42% correct), (b) Monroe Doctrine (34% correct), and (c) G. Washington's beliefs concerning lasting alliances (26% correct).

Insert Table 6 about here

The fifth content area, geography, consists of five items

(see Tables 2 and 7). Overall, student performance was poor. Students performed acceptably on only one item--the war associated with San Juan Hill and Manila Bay (63% correct). Students performed poorly on the following items that required the use of a map: (a) Northwest Territory (48% correct), (b) Texas (53% correct), (c) Louisiana Purchase (35% correct), and (d) territory ceded by Mexico to U. S. (19% correct).

Insert Table 7 about here

The sixth content area, politics, consists of six items (see Tables 2 and 8). Student performance was acceptable on only the item related to the New Deal (87% correct). Students performed poorly on the following topics: (a) section prior to the Civil War who opposed high protective tariffs (58% correct), (b) inventions (cotton gin) of the nineteenth century (43% correct), (c) Andrew Jackson (36% correct), (d) McCarthyism (35% correct), and (e) Watergate and other presidential scandals (31% correct).

Insert Table 8 about here

The seventh content area, economic history, consists of six items (see Tables 2 and 9). Student performance in this category was better than in the other categories. Students knew the characteristics of a free enterprise system (89% correct),

recognized an example of favorable balance of trade (82%), knew a definition of a lockout (80% correct), recognized the rapid industrialization of U.S. (83% correct), and the date of the stock market crash (65% correct). Students did not know about Alexander Hamilton's role in the financial foundation of our government (41% correct).

Insert Table 9 about here

The eighth content area, social history, consists of seven items (see Tables 2 and 10). Eighty-two percent of the students could correctly identify H. B. Stowe. Sixty-six percent could identify that National Socialism (nazism) should not be associated with twentieth-century America. Only 64% of the students knew that the automobile had the greatest impact of several inventions on twentieth-century American lifestyles. Fifty-five percent could identify the Progressives and the Jazz Age of the 1920s. Only 35% could identify the earliest goal of American feminists. Only 50% knew that the problem of caring for the elderly will probably increase in the latter part of the twentieth century.

Insert Table 10 about here

Discussion

The overall performance on this test was dismal. Over three-

fourths of these students would have made a failing score (70% or less). Performance on the eight content areas indicates that students show no strength in any particular content area.

In examining the specific items, there were some items on which student performance was much better than others. We believe all university juniors and seniors should have made a score of at least 70% on this relatively simple test. Therefore, in an attempt to diagnose areas of strengths, we arbitrarily selected 70% as a cut-off percentage for an acceptable performance. Based on this cut-off, there were 13 items on which 70% or more of the students responded correctly. The content of six of these items related to the latter part of the nineteenth or twentieth centuries (relations with the Soviets; New Deal; rapid industrialization of the U.S.; Cuban Missile Crisis; initiative, referendum, recall, and direct primaries; and M. L. King). The content of three items was general in nature (free enterprise system, lockout, and balance of trade). Two items were related to the Civil War (H. B. Stowe and Missouri Compromise). The topic of the two remaining items was the principles expressed in the Declaration of Independence and the location of the Northwest Territory.

These areas of strength can be better clarified by contrasting them with the areas of weakness. Items missed by 50% of the students were classified as areas of weakness. Eighteen items were missed by 50% or more of the students. The following

is a breakdown of the categories in which these items fell: (a) one item covered content related to to the colonial period, (b) four items were categorized as early nation to 1800, (c) seven fell between 1800 and Civil War, (d) one was related to the Reconstruction Era, (e) three were related to happenings which occurred during the twenthieth century, and (f) two were classified as general.

A comparison of strengths and weaknessess indicates that these students know more about recent American history than they do about U.S. history prior to the twentieth century. These findings are consistent with those reported by Ravitch and Finn (1987) for high school students. Apparently, students benefit little from university survey history courses. However, it should be kept in mind that these university students also missed several items related to twentieth-century America.

There are several possible objections and misuses of these data. One possible objection could be related to the test. Is the test a valid measure of students' knowledge of American history? We believe that it is. We would contend that it is a relatively simple test. The test was administered to the twelve year-old daughter of two of the researchers. She had completed fifth-grade U.S. history and one semester of seventh-grade U.S. history. This seventh-grade girl made a score of 28 (the mean for the university sample).

University students often complain that the test measures only

recall information. We do not believe that recall information is necessarily bad. However, after examining items in the test, we question whether most of the items are recall. For instance, students had difficulty placing events in the correct century. We believe that the students did not know that nineteenth century is related to 1800s rather than the 1900s! Other items that the university students complained about appeared to be either generalizations or concepts rather than facts.

A second criticism was raised by a colleague. His response was simply, "So what?" He argued that we really should not care whether elementary education majors know about American history. He argued that knowledge of history has little, if any, bearing on contemporary problems. Furthermore, he contends that such knowledge only serves to hold certain groups of people back, rather than to help them participate in our political and economic system. We disagree. We believe that a knowledge of history is essential to understanding our world and to correcting injustices.

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Table 1

Frequency of Correct Responses

Number of Correct Responses	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
10	1	.7	.7
11	1	.7	1.4
13	1	.7	2.2
14	2	1.4	3.6
16	2	1.4	5.0
17	1	.7	5.8
18	5	3.6	9.4
19	2	1.4	10.8
20	3	2.2	12.9
21	6	4.3	17.3
22	2	1.4	18.7
23	6	4.3	23.0
24	8	5.8	28.8
25	7	5.0	33.8
26	11	7.9	41.7
27	6	4.3	46.0
28	7	5.0	51.1
29	9	6.5	57.6
30	6	4.3	61.9
31	10	7.2	69.1
32	3	2.2	71.2
33	5	3.6	74.8
34	4	2.9	77.7
35	5	3.6	81.3
36	6	4.3	85.6
37	2	1.4	87.1
38	3	2.2	89.2
39	2	1.4	90.6
40	4	2.9	93.5
41	3	2.2	95.7
42	1	.7	96.4
43	2	1.4	97.8
44	1	.7	98.6
45	1	.7	99.3
47	1	.7	100.0

Mean=28.561
Standard Deviation=7.428

Table 2
Frequency of Correct Responses by Item

Item	Content Area	No. of Correct Responses	Percent Correct
1	Chronology	82	59.0
2	Government	36	25.9
3	Ideology	106	76.3
4	Government	101	72.7
5	Chronology	75	54.0
6	Ideology	67	48.2
7	Foreign Policy	90	64.7
8	Government	61	43.9
9	Geography	87	62.6
10	Geography	48	34.5
11	Geography	26	18.7
12	Geography	73	52.5
13	Geography	67	48.2
14	Foreign Policy	47	33.8
15	Ideology	101	72.7
16	Politics	80	57.6
17	Ideology	60	43.2
18	Government	72	51.8
19	Economic History	124	89.2
20	Economic History	111	79.9
21	Economic History	115	82.7
22	Chronology	78	56.1
23	Chronology	77	55.4
24	Economic History	57	41.0
25	Foreign Policy	36	25.9
26	Politics	50	36.0
27	Ideology	51	36.7
28	Government	105	75.5
29	Economic History	90	64.7
30	Foreign Policy	82	59.0
31	Politics	121	87.1
32	Politics	49	35.3
33	Social History	114	82.0
34	Foreign Policy	95	68.3
35	Foreign Policy	59	42.4
36	Chronology	99	71.2
37	Social History	70	50.4
38	Economic History	114	82.0
39	Chronology	96	69.1
40	Ideology	106	76.3
41	Politics	43	30.9
42	Social History	48	34.5
43	Politics	60	43.2
44	Social History	89	64.0
45	Foreign Policy	115	82.7
46	Foreign Policy	87	62.6
47	Social History	91	65.5
48	Foreign Policy	100	71.9
49	Social History	76	54.7
50	Social History	76	54.7

Table 3

Percentage of Correct Responses by Content Area: Chronology

Number of Correct Responses	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
0	2	1.4	1.4
1	12	8.6	10.1
2	22	15.8	25.9
3	29	20.9	46.8
4	25	18.0	64.7
5	30	21.6	86.3
6	19	13.7	100.0
Total	139	100.0	

Mean=3.647

Standard deviation=1.583

Table 4

Percentage of Correct Responses by Content Area: Government

Number of Correct Responses	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
0	5	3.6	3.6
1	16	11.5	15.1
2	39	28.1	43.2
3	45	32.4	75.5
4	24	17.3	92.8
5	10	7.2	100.0
Total	139	100.0	

Mean=2.698

Standard deviation=1.202

Table 5

Percentage of Correct Responses by Content Area: Ideology

Number of Correct Responses	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
0	3	2.2	2.2
1	6	4.3	6.5
2	19	13.7	20.1
3	38	27.3	47.5
4	42	30.2	77.7
5	21	15.1	92.8
6	10	7.2	100.0
Total	139	100.0	

Mean=3.532

Standard deviation=1.337

Table 6

Percentage of Correct Responses by Content Area: Foreign Policy

Number of Correct Responses	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
1	3	2.2	2.2
2	9	6.5	8.6
3	18	12.9	21.6
4	20	14.4	36.0
5	29	20.9	56.8
6	28	20.1	77.0
7	18	12.9	89.9
8	9	6.5	96.4
9	5	3.6	100.0
Total	139	100.0	

Mean=5.115

Standard deviation=1.865

Table 7

Percentage of Correct Responses by Content Area: Geography

Number of Correct Responses	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
0	8	5.8	5.8
1	32	23.0	28.8
2	53	38.1	66.9
3	28	20.1	87.1
4	11	7.9	95.0
5	7	5.0	100.0
Total	139	100.0	

Mean=2.165

Standard deviation=1.189

Table 8

Percentage of Correct Responses by Content Area: Politics

Number of Correct Responses	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
0	2	1.4	1.4
1	19	13.7	15.1
2	36	25.9	41.0
3	43	30.9	71.9
4	18	12.9	84.9
5	15	10.8	95.7
6	6	4.3	100.0
Total	139	100.0	

Mean=2.899

Standard deviation=1.374

Table 9

Percentage of Correct Responses by Content Area: Economic History

Number of Correct Responses	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
0	1	.7	.7
1	3	2.2	2.9
2	9	6.5	9.4
3	15	10.8	20.1
4	43	30.9	51.1
5	35	25.2	76.3
6	33	23.7	100.0
Total	139	100.0	

Mean=4.396

Standard deviation=1.317

Table 10

Percentage of Correct Responses by Content Area: Social History

Number of Correct Responses	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
1	7	5.0	5.0
2	17	12.2	17.3
3	23	16.5	33.8
4	37	26.6	60.4
5	29	20.9	81.3
6	21	15.1	96.4
7	5	3.6	100.0
Total	139	100.0	

Mean=4.058

Standard deviation=1.503